

## **Willapa Estuary Restoration Project Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q1: What exactly is the Willapa River estuary restoration project?**

**A1:** The project includes saltwater marsh restoration to provide estuarine, highway improvements, public access points along US 101 and freshwater habitat.

**Q2: What benefits would this proposal provide the local community?**

**A2:** This proposal would improve habitat for salmon, other fish, and waterfowl, provide recreational access to public lands, and improved highway safety.

**Q3: How would this project benefit fish and wildlife populations?**

**A3:** The proposal would re-establish natural estuarine habitat and additional freshwater habitat. Waterfowl, shorebirds, and amphibians would benefit from the freshwater habitat. Salmon rearing and estuarine-dependant wildlife would benefit from the saltwater restoration.

**Q4: What was the initially proposed project?**

**A4:** The initial project included breaching the existing deteriorated dikes and allowing the unused pastureland to revert back to salt marsh area. The project allowed for saltwater to flow to the other side of US 101 as well, creating a large area of saltwater influenced habitat for fish, birds and other wildlife.

**Q5: How has this project proposal changed?**

**A5:** Public comments on the original proposal led planners to improve public access to the restored area, provide for freshwater wetland enhancement west of highway 101, limit saltwater areas to the river side of the highway, and remove a US 101 bridge from the proposal.

**Q6: Which agencies are involved in this proposed estuary project?**

**A6:** The agencies involved include the Washington State Departments of Fish and Wildlife and Transportation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and Army Corps of Engineers. Ducks Unlimited is also involved.

**Q7: Why are the agencies proposing this project?**

**A7:** The agencies are proposing to restore estuarine habitat, which existed before the area was diked, along the Willapa River. The goal is to restore habitat and water quality, and provide public recreation access to the area.

**Q8: How did this proposal start?**

**A8:** The project began when local landowners approached NRCS with questions about the Wetland Reserve Program. The program allows NRCS to purchase wetland easements on private lands to protect and restore wetland areas. Willing landowners then sold a wetland easement to the NRCS and fee title to WDFW at fair market prices determined by appraisals. From that point other agencies became involved to create a comprehensive estuary restoration project.

**Q9: What will this project cost?**

**A9:** The estimated cost for the entire project is about \$5.9 million. These funds come from a variety of programs to provide improved fish and wildlife habitat.

**Q10: Who is paying for this project?**

**A10:** Both federal and state government along with Ducks Unlimited are contributing to this project. The agencies involved include the Washington State Departments of Fish

and Wildlife and Transportation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and Army Corps of Engineers.

**Q11: What would happen if the agencies don't proceed with this proposal?**

**A11:** If this project does not move forward, federal funding from the Federal Highway Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service goes back to those federal agencies to use for other priority projects in other parts of the country. Additionally, existing dikes may fail in the future, resulting in flooding of the adjoining private property and US 101. The freshwater portions would likely be completed as designed.

**Q11: Can the government spend this money on a different project?**

**A11:** Congress authorizes money be spent by agencies on congressionally directed goals, such as ecosystem restoration and wetlands conservation. The funds in these programs must be used to accomplish the program goals and cannot be directed to other uses. If federal funds are not spent on this specific project, the funds go back to the agency to be spent on other priority projects in a different part of the country.

**Q12: Some members of the public have raised concerns about the proposal; what was done to address these concerns?**

**A12:** Based on comments, the agencies have added highway turnouts, changed the west inundation area to freshwater rather than saltwater, improved public access plans, and are conducting a thorough mosquito study. Other changes to the proposal may occur as a result of comments during the upcoming public review and comment period.

**Q13: Who currently owns the land that would be flooded or otherwise affected by this project?**

**A13:** All the land is publicly held. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is the fee title owner of most of the affected area. There is a small 22-acre parcel on the downstream end of the project area that contains a NRCS wetland easement and is owned by a private individual.

**Q14: Why are several agencies involved in this project?**

**A14:** The **US Fish and Wildlife Service** Coastal Program provides technical assistance and cost-sharing to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats and to support healthy ecosystems.

The **Army Corps of Engineers** can restore ecosystems that have been damaged by prior Corps activities under Section 1135 of the Water Resources Development Act. This project restores an area damaged by the Corps' previous disposal of dredged material in estuarine areas. Additionally, one of the federal laws that the Corps implements is Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. This law requires that a Department of the Army permit be obtained from the Corps for discharging dredged or fill material into waters of the U.S., including wetlands. The agencies propose constructing new dikes and raising the highway in a wetland area.

**Ducks Unlimited** conserves, restores, and manages wetlands and associated habitat, which benefit not only North America's waterfowl, but a variety of wetland dependent species.

The **NRCS** administers the Wetland Reserve Program. It is one of a number of farm bill programs that landowners can participate in on a voluntary basis. Through this program, NRCS purchased a wetland restoration easement on all of the project area from five willing private landowners for the purpose of restoring their agriculturally impacted wetlands. The Wetland Reserve Program has restored over one million acres of wetlands nationwide since 1993.

**Q15: Are the agencies conducting an environmental review of this project?**

**A15:** The agencies are conducting an environmental assessment as required under the National Environmental Policy Act. As part of this review and through the permitting process, the agencies consider impacts to the human environment, including traffic, wetlands, recreation, highway safety, fish and wildlife habitat, and water quality. The project will be reviewed and must be permitted under the Clean Water Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, Pacific County Shoreline Permit, Critical Areas Ordinance State Environmental Policy Act, and Rivers and Harbors Act, and the Washington State Hydraulic Code. The proposal will also be coordinated with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, as required under the Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act. Each permitting agency conducts its own independent review of the proposal.

**Q16: What happens next with this proposal?**

**A16:** Applications were submitted to the permitting agencies June 3. They each have a process for evaluating an application and reaching a permit decision. Once the agencies consider the application complete, they will issue a public notice and ask for public comments regarding the proposal. That public comment period is anticipated to be later this summer. The Corps of Engineers will also hold a public hearing for those who wish to comment in person rather than in writing.

**Q17: How can the public comment or become involved?**

**A17:** The public can offer comments on the plans once the current proposal is sent out for public review and comment later this summer as part of the permitting process.

**Q18: What do the agencies do with public comments?**

**A18:** The agencies consider public comments and acquire any additional information needed for decision making. The agencies with permitting authority will then each reach independent permit decisions, and document how public concerns are addressed.

**Q19: When will the permitting agencies make a decision?**

**A19:** There is no definite timeline for permit decisions. Timing is dependent on ensuring that a thorough review and analysis of the proposal can be conducted and public comments considered.

**Q20: Are the agencies considering impacts, such as traffic, health hazards and water quality, when evaluating this project?**

**A20:** Yes, reviewing and permitting authorities look at impacts to the human environment, including groundwater, recreation, highway safety, human health and economics. The project area was evaluated by a private professional firm for the presence of bacteria, petroleum, pesticides and nitrates. The on-site sampling revealed no contaminant levels of concern.

**Q21: Will this proposal decrease flooding?**

**A21:** The proposed project will raise US 101 above the flood plain and reduce flood risk to the stretch within the project area.

**Q22: Will this project increase the mosquito population and risk of West Nile virus in the South Bend area?**

**A22:** A thorough mosquito study is being conducted this summer. However, scientists already know that introduction of insect-eating fish into what are now pasturelands will likely reduce the mosquito presence on the east side of Highway 101. Additionally, introducing moving water, which is detrimental to mosquito larvae, is expected to reduce populations in that area.

**Q23: Would this project impact the shellfish industry?**

**A23:** The restoration project is likely to improve water quality, which in turn could improve shellfish production. A healthy, productive salt marsh would provide nutrients to support the food web in Willapa Bay.

**Q24: Will this project increase water temperature and quality in the river?**

**A24:** Water quality within the project site is expected to improve due to reintroduction of tidal flushing. Water temperature within the river will not increase. The water quality within the river will improve due to the removal of livestock, homes, septic fields, and the bio-filtration of the new estuarine wetlands.

**Q25: Will this project alter the river's flow or course?**

**A25:** This project is not expected to alter the river's flow or course. Hydraulic monitoring will occur on the project site following construction.

**Q26: Will this project have an effect on local wells?**

**A26:** Most wells in the vicinity tap into a groundwater discharge zone 60 to 100 feet below the surface. Tidal influence would be limited to groundwater near the surface and typically would not extend below 20 feet. The regional aquifer supplying local wells is under pressure that would prevent intrusion of brackish water from the surface.

**Q27: Is monitoring required for this project?**

**A27:** Yes, monitoring would be required for this project. Agencies will monitor and evaluate plants, fish use, channel morphology, bird use, *Spartina* control and water quality. Monitoring will continue for at least five years after construction.

**Q28: Will US 101 be widened as part of this project?**

**A28:** highway shoulders will be widened, and the highway will be raised above the 100-year flood plain. Turnout areas will be added to provide public access to the restored area.

**Q29: When will construction start?**

**A29:** Highway construction is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2005 and is expected to conclude by the end of 2005.

**Q30: How will this project affect Pacific County's tax rolls?**

**A30:** The project, itself, won't have any effect on Pacific County's tax rolls, since the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife owns the property proposed for restoration. In 1999, before WDFW purchased the land, owners paid approximately \$3,500 in property taxes for the four parcels that make up the proposed project site. Last year, WDFW paid more than \$400,000 to counties around the state through its Payment in Lieu of Taxes program, which provides annual compensation to county governments for land removed from the tax rolls. To date, Pacific County has chosen not to participate in that program. In the long run, it is hoped that improved environmental conditions will increase economic opportunities in Pacific County, with benefits for fishing and tourism industries.